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ABSTRACT

Recent writing theory, research, and pedagogy have aided in the development of several models for improving second language writing skills. Attention is focused more on writing as a process, the importance of practice in writing improvement, and the need to learn cognitive structures contributing to writing. Daily journal writing is one method of establishing student commitment to regular writing. Journals provide direct feedback to students, make comparisons among rewrites easy, and facilitate observation of progress across entries. A project in progress in one college language course is investigating whether journal writing can be an effective tool for development of writing skills among business students. Participants are all volunteers, business majors enrolled in a language class. Three activities, outlined as assignments given to students, illustrate the techniques used to encourage self-expression and integrate language use with business-related content. Each activity is designed to take 4 days, with daily conceptual and journal writing exercises. (MSE)

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The Use of Journals to Improve Writing Skills in Commercial Spanish.

State of a Research Project.

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Improving the writing skills of our students seems to be one of the greatest challenges facing language teachers at all levels of the educational system. Good writing, whether in the first or second langauage, does not come easily . Numerous revisions and drafts are necessary before the writer is ready to accept that his or her work is finished. The process of organizing ideas and putting those ideas in writing so that they can presented to a reader is slow and isolating. Many times it is frustrating and painful. If this writing is for a composition class the negative feelings are even stronger. Traditional methods of evaluating students compositions have placed more emphasis on the correctness of the grammatical structures rather than on effective communication.

Research during the last three decades has fortunately taken another direction and writing theory and pedagogy have undergone profound changes. Through the work of dedicated instructors, observations about what actually takes place during the writing process have come to light and several models for improving writing skills both for writing in one's native tongue or in a second or foreign language.

Hairston (The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the revolution in the teaching of writing. College Compositions and Communication,1982, 33, 76–88) was one of the first to realize there was a need to change from a writing–as–product model to one of writing–as–process. This shift of attention represented a fundamental change in perspective and instructional practice.

The theories, methods and practices that characterize writing as a process are clearly described by Osterholm (Writing in the Native Language. 1986. Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, p.117–143). Another significant

contribution is Raimes's book entitled " Exploring Through Writing . A Process Approach to ESL Composition (1987). In her book entitled "Teaching Writing in the Foreighn Language Curriculum (1981), Gaudiani presents a model which has a double purpose. Her model helps the students learn the target language more effectively but at the same time it helps them become better and more fluent writers in their own native languages She believes that "through constant practice in writing, revising, and editing, and through concentration on basis elements of prose style, these [language composition] courses might offer many advantages to students hoping to improve their ability to write" (Preface, xiv).

Language has a dual purpose in the foreign language classroom: it is a support skill as well as a communicative skill. Dvorak (Writing in the Foreign Language. Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Langauges.1986,p.147), who has done extensive research on writing recognizes that the new approaches to language and language learning have had a minor impact on language writing. She acknowledges a greater need for more personal assignments and for earlier exposure to creative or free composition.

Rohman (Pre-writing : The stage of discovery in the writing process. College Composition and Communication, 1965, 16, p.107) explains the need for students to learn the " structures of thinking that lead to writing. " He believes that there are three ways or activities by which such structures may be best known : journal writing, meditating and analogy making". Now many teachers favor the use of journals in their composition classes. Gaudiani's model on teaching writing relies on in-class editing, reading and discussion of students essays. What is essential for her, is the students'

commitment to regular writing. This commitment constitutes the core of the approach. Students write a composition every week, keep a daily journal and rewrite every effort until they acheive a satisfactory result. Raimes's model, quoted above, includes journal assignments in the first eight chapters.

Journal entries usually consist of a simple short paragragh, generally on a topic chosen by the student. Gaudiani (op.cit, p.37) reports that as the students feel more comfortable with the language, the entries become longer. For her, the objective of keeping a journal is to " help the students overcome the fear of committing pen to paper". Moreover, it helps the student grow confident about describing daily life, emotions, and events in their second language.

The advantages of journaling are many. Besides providing a direct way of giving feedback to individual students it is very helpful for keeping rewrites together, making it easier for the teacher to compare reentries and to observe progress.

Adapting journaling to meet the needs of different types of writing seems to be an interesting field for research. Since Toby Fulwiler's article "Journals across the Disciplines" (English Journal, Dec., 1980), many teachers have recognized the advantages of a journal as a way to satisfy the students' need for self-expression and self-exploration. Taylor (The Travel Journal: an Assessment Tool for Overseas Study. 1991) sees the journal "as an appropriate evaluation mode because it is a learning activity that encourages reflective observation."

The purpose of this paper is to test the effectiveness of journal keeping as a technique to improve writing skills in commercial Spanish. Those of us who have had

experience in teaching business writing are aware that each student needs personal attention and that in every class students are at different levels in both their speaking and writing skills. The goal of commercial writing is to prepare the students to interact in the world of business through writing business reports or maintaining business correspondence. This, however, can only be achieved when the students have become confident in the use of the foreign language, that is, before attempting to write reports or business letters, we need to give them ample opportunity to explore different ways of expression in the foreign language.

Also true is that many language students need to see a practical side to their language learning. Business students are well aware of the skills they will need to be successful in business today. Most composition classes focus on general topics. Why not start the students early on topics related to the world of business ? The journal provides a way to let the students find their way through the new vocabulary and expressions. It helps them to create a background in the types of learning necessary to eventually be able to produce successful and acceptable business writing.

The present study is an attempt to let the students explore the business world in small steps through a personal, ungraded set of tasks. The students are the typical fourth semester college students in a language class. They volunteered for this project because they are all future business majors and they were interest in later pursuing studies in International Trade or finding a job with a multinational company.Four kinds of activities have been planned for them, so far I have exposed them to only three types. From this preliminary study I am trying to discover if journaling can be an effective tool for use in a business class.

FIRST ACTIVITY : THINK ABOUT IT!

1. **Day 1 of this assignment.** Think about something you have bought because of a T V commercial or advertisement on a magazine. Now answer these questions :

   What was the product being advertized ?

   Was this commercial on T.V. or in a newspaper or magazine ?

   Can you remember if any specific words attracted your attention to the product ?

   Can you remember exactly what made you go and buy it ?

   Was it what the product could do for you or was it that the commercial was enternainig and made the product look good ?

   Was the description of the product accurate ?

   Did they simply describe the product or did they focus on what it you could use it for ?

   Now write the list of words you think you will need to write about the commercial. Make sure you write down the gender of each noun so as to control agreement. Look them up in your dictionary. Cross check for correct word.

Journal Assignment.

Try to recreate the commercial in Spanish. You don't have to write it down word by word , just try a few sentences using the
new vocabulary you have learned.

2. **Day 2 of this assignment.** Think about the commercial again. Try to remember the following:

   Were you disappointed when you actually saw the product ?

   Was the description accurate?

   Would you recommend the product to a friend ?

   If you would, how would YOU describe the product ?

   Now read the commercial you wrote yesterday. Check and see if you can correct any mistakes you made.

Journal assignment.
Rewrite the commercial, adding what you would like to emphasize about the product.

3. **Day three of the assignment.** If you actually were assigned to write this commercial:

   What would you change?

   What new words would you need to be able to express your ideas ?

   What was in your opinion the strongest point in the commercial ?

   Is there any way to improve the quality of the commercial ?

Journal assigment.
Write to a friend telling the story about this commercial that led you to go and buy the product. Try to sound enthusiastic and persuasive to see if your friend will also check it out.

4. **Day four of the assignment.** Go over the letter you wrote yesterday. Check to see if you can find any mistakes. Is there anything you would still like to change?

Journal assignment.
Write a commercial advertizing a product of your choice. Make a list of the words you will need and remember to include gender information. Use your own judgement in deciding whether a lot of description needs to be included or if you want to concentrate on what it will do for the reader.

DON'T FORGET TO HAND IN YOUR JOURNAL TOMORROW IN CLASS!

SECOND ACTIVITY: READ ABOUT IT !

1. **Day one of the assignment.** Read the following advertisement. Make a list of all the new words and look up their meanings.
   Now answer the following questions:

   What is being advertized ?

   What information is provided ?

   Would you find the same information in a similar commercial in an American newspaper ?

   Can you describe what would be different between the two commercials ?

   What new words did you learn from this exercise ?

Journal assignment.
Write down your opinion on this commercial .Imagine you are asked to evaluate it and give your OK to use it. Look up any new words you need and keep a list of it.

2. **Day two of the assignment.** Read your last journal entry. Check for any agreement mistakes. Now answer these questions:

   Do you think your commerial is fair to the product ?

   What kind of public are you hoping to attract ?

   If your product is something children would like, is there anything you would like to say to the parents, wife/husband, other?

Journal Assignment.
Imagine one of your employees has presented you with this commercial. Write to him /her giving your opinion, emphasize what you think is good and try to suggest ONE way of improving it.

3. **Third day of the assigment.** Read your commercial again. Then read your last journal entry.

   Do you agree with your own criticism of your own commercial?

   What is the strongest point in your commercial ?

   Have you read or watched a commercial offering the same product ?

   If your answer is yes, What did they focus on ?

   Did they use the same words ?

   Was the emphasis on the same aspects you selected ?

Journal assignment.
Write a short report comparing your commercial with one you have seen or heard that offers the same or a similar product.

4. **Fourth day of the assignment.** You are now going to write a commercial offering a specific product: perfume/ cologne.

   Look up the words you will need to write your commercial and make a list making sure to check for all the information you will need.

   How will you describe the product?

   How will you express the advantages of buying your product?

   If the commercial is for T.V. what will be the setting?

   What type of music will you use?

   If it is for a magazine, What visual effects will you aim at?

Journal assignment.
Now write your commercial! Good luck !

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THIRD ACTIVITY: READ SOME MORE!

1. **Day one of the assigment.** Here is an article for you to read. Today I would like you to make a list of the new words and look up their meanings.

Journal assignment.
Take five of the new words and write the sentences in which they are used. Then make an entry telling about these new words , what they mean and how they are used in the article.

2. **Day two of the assignment.** Read yesterday's entry. Edit. Now answer the following questions about the article :

   What is the article about?

   Who invented this credit system?

   What are the advantages of this credit system?

Journal assignemnt.
Write to a friend telling him/her about this article you read and why you think he/she should also read this article.

3. **Day three of the assignment.** Read the letter you wrote to your friend. You now think you would like to include more information, such as:

   What is the most you may borrow?

   How will you pay back this loan?

   Why is this credit better than the one you had before?

Journal assignment.
Rewrite the letter to your friend adding the new information.
Tell him/her how you will use this credit and suggest he/she should try it too.

4. **Day four of the assignment.** Read the article again and the letters to your friend. Now imagine the person who wrote the article needs to know your opinion. Think about the words you will need, make a list and look them up.

Journal assignment.
Write a critical review of the article. Highlight the strong points and suggest ONE way to improve it.

DON'T FORGET TO HAND IN YOUR JOURNAL TOMORROW IN CLASS!